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SUBJECT: LIBERMAN'S VISIT TO MOSCOW AND MINSK PART OF GOI
EFFORT TO EXPAND RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

REF: MOSCOW 1488

Classified By: Political Counselor Marc Sievers, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (S) Summary. The MFA's readout on Foreign Minister Liberman's June 2-3 visit to Moscow closely tracked with Embassy Moscow reftel, but with some interesting differences of nuance: the Israelis stated that Liberman's outreach to the Russians represents a new foreign policy priority for Israel, but is not intended to supplant the centrality of strategic ties to the U.S. Gaining Israeli support for the Moscow Middle East peace conference was high on the Russian agenda, but Liberman demurred and suggested the Russians settle the agenda with the U.S. during President Obama's visit. MFA Director for Eurasia Koren, who accompanied Liberman, stressed Israeli concern that Russia still plans to go ahead with the delivery of S-300 air to ground missiles to Iran, and asked that the President raise this issue with the Russians. Koren was visibly embarrassed about Liberman's statement that Israel has no plans to attack Iran, since this is out of sync with repeated warnings by PM Netanyahu and Def Min Barak that Israel is keeping "all options on the table." Russian Ambassador Stegniy told the Ambassador June 18 that PM Netanyahu had phoned PM Putin June 17 to discuss Netanyahu's diplomatic speech as well as Iran. Putin reportedly cautioned Netanyahu that Russia remains completely opposed to military action or even threats of military action against Iran. Despite differences over Iran, Israeli-Russian relations are developing rapidly. Liberman was only one of five Israeli cabinet ministers to visit Moscow since the Netanyahu government was formed in March, and Putin reportedly told Liberman that he would like to see Israeli-Russian trade triple within a year. The Israelis are also pleased by Russian assurances that Russia is committed to the security and well-being of the Israeli people, a message that the Israelis think may have some impact on Iranian and Syrian thinking. Liberman reportedly asked Putin to tell the Iranians that he condemns the denial of the Holocaust. On Belarus, Koren said the Israelis have no illusions about the Lukashenko regime but they nonetheless intend to remain engaged without getting too much out ahead of the U.S. and EU. End Summary.

Liberman Prioritizing Relations with Russia

¶2. (C) MFA Director for Eurasia Gary Koren, a Russian-speaker who accompanied Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman on his June 2-3 working visit to Moscow, provided PolCouns with a readout June 16. Commenting on a report in the New York Times, Koren stressed that while Liberman wants to raise the profile of Israeli-Russian relations and attaches a very high priority to their development, no one in the GOI is seeking to have Russia replace the U.S. as Israel's primary strategic partner. There is no substitute for Israel's relations with the U.S. Koren said, adding that the Russians made no reference to recent tensions in Israeli-U.S. relations during Liberman's discussions with Medvedev, Putin and Lavrov.

¶3. (C) Koren commented that the Russians received Liberman well, treating him like a "local boy who had done well" who had come home for a visit. Liberman previously visited Russia in 2007 when he was Minister for Strategic Threats in the Olmert government, but this was his first visit as Foreign Minister. According to Koren, although the Russians provided an official Hebrew interpreter, they were delighted that Liberman chose to conduct all of his meetings in Russian.

Moscow Middle East Conference

¶4. (C) Koren said gaining Israeli support for a Moscow Middle East peace conference was the Russians' top goal for the visit. When the Russians raised the conference idea in 2008, then-Prime Minister Olmert and Foreign Minister Livni did not reject it, but were nevertheless skeptical. Liberman's response to the Russians was somewhat more positive, indicating GOI support for the conference in principle, but he reiterated Israeli questions about the agenda and participants. Liberman also suggested that the Russians should engage President Obama on this during his July 6 visit to Moscow. Koren noted that MFA DDG for International Organizations Manor had consulted with the Russian UN mission during a visit to New York this week, and got the impression that the Russians feel that the U.S. is now generally supportive of the Moscow conference.

¶5. (C) Lavrov told Liberman that the Russians are thinking in terms of "Annapolis plus," with the goal of producing

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specific results. The basis would be similar to the Arab Peace Initiative, minus the Palestinian refugee issue. Koren noted that Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit has already indicated that Egypt is opposed to a conference if it will be "only a photo op." Koren commented that the GOI was pleased with the Russian statement on Netanyahu's Bar Ilan address, though it noted the negative Arab reaction. Liberman thanked Lavrov for Russia's "positive role" as Security Council President in May, during which there were no "troublesome" resolutions or presidential statements.

Arms Sales to PA, Georgia, Iran

¶6. (S) Koren said Liberman had conveyed the Israeli MOD's approval of a package of Russian arms transfers to the Palestinian Authority, though with some restrictions. The GOI approved the transfer of twenty-five out of fifty requested BTR 70 APCs, and without the mounted light machine guns that the PA had wanted; 3,000 Kalashnikov rifles and ammunition; and two helicopters which will be based in Amman and for which the Israelis have agreed to provide an air corridor to Ramallah.

¶7. (S) As reported by Embassy Moscow, Koren said the Russians raised Israel's role in the resupply of arms for Georgia, Koren said Liberman stressed that Israel would only provide "defensive arms" to Georgia. Koren added that the GOI views the supply of arms to Georgia as a potential form of leverage over Russian arms sales to Iran and Syria. He did not mention reports of Israeli plans to sell UAV technology to Russia, but said the GOI is trying to develop an understanding of Russia's policy on arms sales to the Middle East.

¶8. (S) Koren said stopping the delivery of S-300 surface to air missiles to Iran remains a top Israeli objective and featured prominently in Liberman's discussions. Koren noted that despite several high-level Israeli interventions, including during the visit to Moscow of former PM Olmert shortly before he left office, the Israeli sense is that the Russians intend to go ahead with delivery of the S-300s. In

response to Liberman's comments on the destabilizing effect of the S-300s, Koren said the Russian response was that the S-300s are "only destabilizing if you are planning to attack Iran." The Israeli assessment is that fulfilling the contract for the sale of the S-300s is a matter of prestige to Russia. It may also be associated in the Russians' thinking with competition with the U.S. in that the Russians believe the S-300 to be superior to comparable U.S. systems. Koren said Liberman will raise the S-300 sale during his meetings in Washington, and will likely request that President Obama press the Russians not to go ahead with delivery during his visit to Moscow.

Assessments of Iran, Possible Use of Force

¶19. (S) During Liberman's discussions on Iran, Koren said the Russians admitted for the first time that they underestimated the pace and technical sophistication of Iran's missile program, something the Russians reportedly termed an "intelligence failure." Koren implied that the Russian political leadership is likely to conclude that their intelligence on Iran's nuclear program has also been faulty.

¶10. (S) Russian Ambassador Petr Vladimirovich Stegnyi told the Ambassador June 18 that PM Netanyahu had phoned PM Putin the night of June 17. Netanyahu offered some thoughts about resuming negotiations with the Palestinians after his June 14 Bar Ilan address, and also made what Stegnyi termed "explicit" comments on Iran, presumably threatening the use of force if diplomacy fails to stop Iran's nuclear program. Putin reportedly replied that Russia sees new opportunities for diplomacy with Iran in the wake of the mass anti-Ahmadinejad demonstrations, and that Russia cannot accept even threats to use force, arguing that threats only strengthen Iranian hardliners. Stegnyi commented that Russia is "completely opposed" to a possible Israeli strike on Iran, in part because it could ignite the Caucasus and southern Russia as well as the Gulf.

Russian Ambassador Comments on Peace Process

¶11. (C) On the peace process, Stegnyi told the Ambassador that the Russians consider Liberman to be a largely positive influence within the GOI, in part because of Liberman's support for the Roadmap, while Netanyahu continues to have reservations about the Roadmap, to which he did not refer during his Bar Ilan speech. Stegnyi said Netanyahu

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complained to Putin about Lavrov's meeting with Hamas leader Khalid Mashal, to which Putin replied that Russia believes in keeping channels open. Stegnyi commented that Russia has been engaged with Hamas for some time about the release of kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, but he said without elaborating that he had concluded that it was "impossible to trust" Hamas' Damascus leadership on the Shalit issue.

Liberman in Belarus

¶12. (C) Briefing on Liberman's stop in Minsk, Koren said the GOI had no illusions about Lukashenko and his regime, but they decided that following Solana's visit, the timing was right for Liberman to visit Belarus as well. Israel has two interests in Belarus: the safety and well-being of the Jewish community and limiting Belarus' military and scientific cooperation with Iran. Liberman met with Jewish leaders in Minsk and was reassured about their situation. Koren noted that anti-Semitism is a more serious problem in Ukraine than Belarus despite Ukraine's good relations with the West. Liberman asked Lukashenko to minimize training of Iranian military officers and scientists. As they had in Russia, Koren said Liberman asked the Belarus leadership to tell the Iranians that Holocaust denial and threats to

destroy Israel are unacceptable. Koren assured PolCouns that Israel would like to follow the U.S. lead on Belarus, but intends to remain engaged.

Comment

¶13. (C) Liberman may be providing the leadership, but the GOI broadly sees new opportunities in Israel's relationship with Russia, despite their clear differences over how to handle Iran, Syria, and Hamas. Speaking at the Russian national day reception June 16, Israeli Tourism Minister Stas Misejnikov, from Liberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party, announced that he would depart for a working visit to Moscow the next day, which would make him the fifth GOI minister to visit Moscow since the Netanyahu government was formed in March. Misejnikov also noted the rapid increase in the number of Russian tourists visiting Israel, which jumped to 356,000 in 2008 from 193,000 in 2007, an eighty-four percent increase! Misejnikov touted Liberman's decision to launch a Strategic Dialogue with Russia similar to that which Israel has conducted with the U.S. for the past decade, although the Russian Embassy has told us that Russia prefers to keep the dialogue limited and at a working level. Bilateral trade lags behind Israeli trade with Turkey and Japan, not to mention the EU and U.S., but Putin has reportedly called for tripling trade levels this year. While not trusting Russian intentions toward Iran and Syria, the Israelis do see some utility in top-level Russian expressions of commitment to the security and well-being of Israel and especially the roughly two million Israelis who either emigrated from the former Soviet Union or were born in Israel to Soviet emigrant parents. They believe such Russian statements may have some sobering impact on strategic calculations in Iran and Syria.

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